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Larry Downing—NEWSWEEK

The Soviet spy nest on Belmont Road: FBI agents were surprised by their catch

'They Bagged an Eagle'

It was a gloomy, drizzly winter day—a perfect day, in the tradition of espionage thrillers, to catch a spy. And if the setting—a Virginia shopping mall just outside Washington—was, well, a bit too plastic for John Le Carré, the spy was real enough: Vasily I. Chitov, a major general in the Soviet Army, Moscow's top-ranking military attaché in Washington and, according to the FBI, a senior agent for the GRU, Soviet military intelligence.

Chitov was lured to the shopping mall's parking lot to collect what he thought would be secret documents from an unidentified American contact. But the American was a double agent, and once the documents changed hands, a team of waiting FBI men swooped in to make an arrest. Chitov sped away in his car—only to be cut off and nabbed by members of the stakeout team who had sealed off the area and blocked his getaway. The agents, expecting to find only some mid-level embassy functionary doing the mundane legwork of espionage, were stunned by their prime catch. "The FBI went looking for a sparrow," said one government official, "and they bagged an eagle." The identity of the double agent and the contents of the secret papers were not immediately disclosed. Chitov, protected by diplomatic immunity, was declared *persona non grata* and quickly sent home.

Chitov had been one of the GRU's less-conspicuous operatives, assigned to the Soviet Embassy's military-affairs office on Belmont Road in northwest Washington. U.S. officials say other GRU men openly patrol Congressional hearing rooms in nur-

research such as the fusion-energy program. On one occasion, one of Chitov's brasher colleagues astounded staffers of the House Armed Services Committee by demanding committee data as a matter of right. The material, the Russian declared, was a matter of public record. Another agent, Maj. Yuriy P. Leonov, has become a fixture on Capitol Hill, badgering staffers for information on military matters. Last May he asked a South Dakota congressman for copies of a bill on an underwater missile system.

'Dangles': Chitov's entanglement with a double agent was not surprising. Double agents—"dangles"—are frequently employed by the FBI to send disinformation to Soviet intelligence analysts, to make Moscow doubt the authenticity of real intelligence it has acquired, and to baby-sit GRU and KGB agents in the United States. "If we can put five dangles in front of a KGB guy, he looks good to his boss, and we're controlling him," says one former FBI man. "He has little time to go out and find agents we don't know about." The open question was why the Reagan Administration chose last week to break off its double game with Chitov. Often such crackdowns are meant as diplomatic code to register disapproval with Soviet policy. Whether the Chitov case was such a gesture, officials were not saying; in fact, the Administration seemed to be embarrassed by the disclosure of Chitov's arrest and ouster, and a criminal investigation into the leak may soon be ordered. Surveillance along Belmont Road, meanwhile, will continue—part of the endless game of spy and counterspy with the Kremlin.